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ETHNOLOGY.—*Identification and history of the Small Robes Band of the Piegan Indians.*[1]

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A few years ago Dr. H. H. Turney-High questioned elderly Kutenai Indians of northwestern Montana and southeastern British Columbia about the other tribes of which they were aware. Among the people who lived across the Rockies to the east of the Kutenai they mentioned the—

> Little Blankets (k'tsałmałnána). These people lived in Canada and are said to be related to the Blood, although Chief Kustata denies that they are Blood proper. Most informants think that they were a band of Blood and are now extinct. Being of the Blackfoot group they were, of course, enemies.
>
> Chief Paul disagrees in the identification of the Little Blankets, claiming that they are just the ordinary enemy seen around Browning, that there is nothing mysterious about their identity, that they are just ordinary "South Piegan." (Turney-High, 1941, p. 28.)

In spite of their lack of agreement as to the exact identity of these people, it is apparent that the modern Kutenai referred to the Small Robes (Inuksiks), who were a large and powerful group on the Northwestern Plains little more than a century ago. A number of references to this group as Small Robes, Little Robes, Little Robe's Band, and even as Little Rogue's Band appear in the early literature on the Northwestern Plains region. Since the information on this once important group is widely scattered in meager references, some of which are conflicting, it may be well to bring it together and evaluate it here, and to add such information as we were able to obtain from elderly Indians on the Blackfeet Reservation, Montana, in the years 1942–44, regarding the present numbers of the Small Robes and traditional history of the group.

The earliest reference to the Small Robes was made by the artist-writer George Catlin, who regarded the Small Robes as a separate major division of the Blackfoot group of tribes. Catlin (1841, vol. 1, p. 52) divided the Blackfoot into "four bands or families, as follows: the 'Pe-a-gans,' of 500 lodges; the 'Blackfoot' band, of 450 lodges; the 'Blood' band, of 450 lodges; and the 'Small Robes,' of 250 lodges. These bands constituting about 1,650 lodges, averaging ten to the lodge, amount to about 16,500 souls."

Catlin never penetrated the Blackfoot country, although he did meet some Blackfoot Indians who visited Fort Union in the Assiniboine country on the Upper Missouri in the summer of 1832. Catlin obtained his information on the divisions and numbers of the Blackfoot from the fur traders at the fort. These men apparently considered the Small Robes to be a large and separate major division of the Blackfoot group, comprising some 2,500 persons, or roughly 15 percent of the total Blackfoot population. However, it is well to remember that American traders had a limited acquaintance with the Blackfoot in 1832. Fort Piegan, the first American trading post in the Blackfoot country, had been established less than a year before. Catlin's estimate for the entire Blackfoot group appears high in comparison with the estimates of other and probably better informed, white men.[2]

[1] Published by permission of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. Received November 6, 1946.

[2] See Wissler, 1936. Tables of population estimates pp. 4, 6. The recollections of the aged fur

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At an unrecorded date during his half century of contact with the Blackfoot tribes (1804–54), John Rowand, veteran Hudson's Bay Company trader, made an estimate of the population of these tribes. In addition to the "Blackfeet proper, Piegans, Bloods, Gros Ventres or Fall Indians, and Circes," he listed a sixth group, the "Mountain Tribes," comprising the "Cotones" (Kutenai) and Small Robes. He reckoned the combined population of these two "Mountain Tribes" at 250 tents or approximately 2,000 souls. (Hind, 1860, vol. 2, p. 152.)

Father De Smet, who became acquainted with the Small Robes in the early 1840's also considered them a separate tribe of the Blackfoot group. He definitely characterized them as non-Piegan:

> The tribe of the Piegans forms a portion of the six tribes known by the generic name of Blackfeet. The other five are the Blackfeet, properly so called, the Men of Blood, the Sarcees, the Little Robes, and the Grosventres.[3]

At the time of Father De Smet's early labors at the Flathead Mission in the Bitterroot Valley west of the Rockies, the Small Robes were at peace with the Flathead, although the majority of the Blackfoot were hostile. Possibly as early as 1842, the Small Robes visited the mission, became greatly interested in Christianity, and permitted many, if not all, of their children to be baptized by Father De Smet and his associates.[4]

In the year 1845, the Small Robes suffered a severe defeat in a battle with the Crows. Father De Smet mourned their loss in a letter from the west of October 30, 1845 (Chittenden and Richardson, 1905, vol. 2, p. 524):

> The year 1845 will be a memorable epoch in the sad annals of the Blackfeet nation. . . . The Crows have struck them a mortal blow—fifty families, the entire band of the Little Robe, were lately massacred, and 160 women and children have been led into captivity.

Denig (1930, pp. 551–554), the fur trader, probably referred to this action in a statement written in 1854:

> The Crow Indians a few years since, after killing all the men and boys of 50 lodges of the Blackfeet, took prisoners upward of 200 women and children. One of our gentlemen now in charge of that nation was with the Crow camp when the battle took place, and for two or three months afterwards, during which time he sought occasions to liberate about 50 women and send them home to their people.

However, the destruction of the Small Robes was not as complete as Father De Smet at first feared. A dozen lodges of Blackfoot accompanied the Flathead-Nez Percé camp on its fall buffalo hunt east of the Rockies in 1846, during which this allied force met and defeated the Crows in a fierce battle. De Smet complimented the small Blackfoot group on their bravery exhibited in the fight (Chittenden and Richardson, 1905, vol. 2, pp. 578–579):

> The little party of Blackfeet, animated by a spirit of revenge for the loss of half their tribe, massacred the preceding year by the Crows . . . did signal service in the combat.

In view of De Smet's conception of the Small Robes as a distinct tribal division of the Blackfoot, we may conclude that the Blackfoot members of that party must have been Small Robes. De Smet's earlier statement relative to the massacre of the entire tribe should be revised in the light of this later reference to the "loss of half their tribe" in the battle with the Crows in 1845.

Whether a considerable number of the Small Robes men, as well as the women, survived that battle, or whether a portion of the Small Robes were not engaged, we do not know. It is certain that the Small Robes, though greatly reduced in numbers, continued their existence as a group. The fur trader Charles Larpenteur met them south of the Missouri in the summer of 1848. He attempted to obtain horses from them, but they refused, as

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trader Hugh Monroe that the Small Robes numbered "more than one hundred lodges" in the second decade of the 19th century may be nearer the strength of the band in 1832 than Catlin's estimate. See also Schultz, 1927, p. 13.

[3] Chittenden and Richardson, 1905, vol. 3, p. 949. However, Father Nicholas Point, who spent the fall and winter of 1846–47 in the Piegan camps, did not consider the Small Robes a separate division of the Blackfoot group. Footnote 5, same page.

[4] *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 593. See McClintock, 1910, pp. 157–166, for a later Indian tradition of the Small Robes' relationship with Father De Smet and their acceptance of Christianity.

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they had quarreled with their old friends the Flathead and feared, correctly, that Larpenteur would use the horses to carry arms and ammunition to their new enemy.

> A band of Blackfeet, called the Little Robes, after the name of their chief, instead of following the rest of the tribe north after trade was over, remained on the south side of the Missouri. Some of Little Robe's young men happened to have a fight with the Flatheads; some one of each party was killed and horses were stolen. So the peace was broken and the Flatheads returned to their country as fast as they could. (Larpenteur, 1898, vol. 2, pp. 259–260.)

The peace referred to was the one established through the efforts of Father De Smet in September 1846, between the Flathead and the Blackfoot tribes at the Piegan camp east of the Rockies. Now the Small Robes, who must have been influential in the making of it, were among the first to break the peace.

In 1850, Thaddeus A. Culbertson, on the authority of Malcolm Clark, who was then in charge of the American Fur Company's post at Fort Benton, identified the "Little Robes" as one of the bands of the Piegan (Culbertson, 1851, p. 144). Three years later, J. M. Stanley, artist for the Pacific Railway Survey, included the "Little Rogue's band of 30 lodges" in his enumeration of Piegan bands (Stanley, 1855, p. 449). The sound similarity between "Rogue's" and "Robe's" is so close as to suggest the likelihood that an error was made in recording the interpreter's English translation. Certainly there is no other authority for the existence of a Piegan band by the name of Little Rogue's. Thus, in less than a decade, and primarily as the result of war casualties in a single battle, the Small Robes were reduced from a large band to a group of 30 lodges, much the smallest of the five Piegan bands enumerated by Stanley.

In the winters of 1855 and 1856 the Small Robes were characterized as a group of unwelcome loafers about Fort Benton. The band is mentioned in several brief entries in the Fort Benton Journal (McDonnell, 1940) during that period:

> Jan. 9, 1855. A few lousey Pagans from Little Robes band arrived with a horse and a Robe or two to trade . . . [p. 16].
>
> Jan. 16, 1855. Sent an Indian to Little Robe Camp to see if these Indians had not picked up our horses . . . [p. 18].
>
> Dec. 16, 1855. . . . in the afternoon Camp of "Little Robes" arrived with their Lodges which they have pitched in the Prarie behind . . . [p. 56].
>
> Dec. 18, 1855. Little Robe Band moved Camp and intend settling for the present at Pablos Island to dress what Robes they have . . . [p. 56].
>
> January 9, 1856. A Little Robe Ind. passed with one Robe to trade being all we have got for the past two days . . . [p. 58].
>
> January 13, 1856. The Little Robe band moving Camp from across on "Chantier" looked in to loaf and anoy us but gave us no Robes . . . [p. 59].
>
> January 26, 1856. Some Little Robes paid us another loafing visit for the 100th time . . . [p. 61].

This pitiless description of the remnant of the once powerful Small Robes is in striking contrast to Lt. Bradley's opinion of what might have been their lot had it not been for the battle with the Crows in 1845. Writing 70 years ago, Lt. Bradley said of "the Little Robe band of Piegans" (Bradley, 1923, pp. 281–282):

> At the time the whites first became acquainted with the Piegans (1831), though avowedly a part of the Piegan tribe, they lived wholly by themselves, seldom meeting with the remainder of the tribe and showing so marked a line of separation that by one or two writers they were classed as a separate tribe. Had they not unfortunately suffered utter extermination a few years later at the hands of the Crows, it is probable that long ere this their tribal independence would have been universally conceded.

George Bird Grinnell (1892, pp. 209, 225) identified the Small Robes as a Piegan band. In his diagram of the Piegan camp circle of about 1850–55, he placed the lodges of the Small Robes in the southeastern portion of the circle, indicating that the Small Robes were considered an integral part of the Piegan tribe. Clark Wissler (1911, p. 11) listed the Small Robes as a Piegan band.

In our investigations on the Blackfeet Reservation, Montana, from 1942–44, it was found that only two families, the Day Riders and the Calf Robes, were considered by the older Indians to be members of the Small Robes band.[5]

[5] Research performed under the auspices of the U. S. Indian Service, while the writer was Curator, Museum of the Plains Indian, Browning, Mont.

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Mike Day Rider (born 1871), senior surviving member, said that the Small Robes were always a Piegan band, joining the Piegan camp circle each summer for the tribal sun dance. He had "always been told" that the Small Robes had once been a very large band. However, he knew nothing of any disastrous battle with the Crows in the early days or of his people's early interest in Christianity. He recalled that the Small Robes were said to have been more friendly toward the Flathead than other Piegan bands; that the Small Robes had even furnished ammunition to the Flathead for use in fighting the other bands of the Blackfoot. Mike said that the Small Robes broke up as a residential group while the Blackfeet Agency was at Old Agency, about 60 years ago. Lodge Pole, the last chief of the Small Robes, died in the 1890's. Day Rider had not heard of a chief of the band by the name of Little Robe. He recited the following tradition of the derivation of the name of the band:

> A long time ago there was a young woman of this band who was very pretty. Many young men wished to marry her, but she refused them all. Her father asked her to marry a certain young man he had selected for her. Still she refused. Later the young woman found a sweetheart of her own choice. She doubled a year old buffalo calf robe over her head and neck like a scarf and went to meet him. That is how the Small Robes band got its name.

Richard Sanderville (Chief Bull), who is not a Small Robes member, cited additional traditional evidence regarding the history of the band. His version of the origin of the band name differed from Mike Day Rider's:

> The band was named after the peculiar custom of its members of wearing pieces of buffalo robes, smaller than whole robes, as shawls thrown over their shoulders when visiting other bands.[6]

He said that the Small Robes once fought a bitter battle with the entire Crow camp in the Judith Basin country south of the Missouri, and that the chief of the band, who went by the name of Little Robe, died of wounds received in that battle. He had heard that some of the Small Robes women, dressed as men, took active part in the fighting. Sanderville was also familiar with the tradition of Small Robe friendship with the Flathead:

> They were very friendly with the Flatheads, and frequently joined them in hunting buffalo on the plains. At one time, before the 1855 Blackfoot Treaty, the Piegans fought the Flatheads on the Musselshell River. On that occasion the Small Robes helped the Flatheads by supplying them with Piegan ammunition.

Sanderville stated that the Small Robes were always a Piegan band, joining the other bands each sun dance season in the great camp circle. He understood that the Small Robes were once a very large band.

Other elderly Piegan Indians, who were not members of the Small Robes band, believed that it was at one time very large, more friendly toward the Flathead than other Piegan bands, but definitely a band of the Piegan tribe, not a separate division of the Blackfoot group.

CONCLUSIONS

In the early part of the 19th century the Small Robes were probably the largest band of the Piegan Indians. Catlin's estimate of the band's size in 1832 is probably high. We estimate conservatively that the band may have numbered as many as 150 lodges and nearly 1,500 souls before the smallpox epidemic of 1837. Although there is no record of Small Robes losses in that disaster, doubtless their numbers were considerably lessened by that plague. In Father De Smet's time (1844), the Small Robes probably numbered 80 or more lodges. Of these, the men of approximately 50 lodges were massacred in a bitter fight with a large body of Crow Indians in 1845. By 1853, the Small Robes numbered about 30 lodges. Since that date their membership has decreased until, at the present time, only two families of this once powerful band remain—the Day Riders and Calf Robes of the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana.

Because of the large size of the Small Robes band prior to 1845, and their relative independence of action (which was made possible by their numerical strength), the group was considered by Catlin's sources of information, by the experienced Canadian

[6] McClintock, 1923, p. 251: They were called "Small Robes, because of the size of their robes."

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trader John Rowand, and by Father De Smet to have been a major division of the Blackfoot group of tribes, distinct from the Piegan. This independence of action was most marked in their friendship for the Flathead, whom most Piegan regarded as tribal enemies. Not only did the Small Robes join the Flathead on their buffalo-hunting excursions on the plains east of the mountains, but also they journeyed across the Rockies to pay friendly visits to the Flathead camps in the Bitterroot Valley. At the Flathead Mission they came under the influence of Father De Smet and his associates, who baptized the Small Robe children in the Christian faith. The Small Robes were probably the first of the Piegan bands to accept Christianity. This was before the Small Robes' crucial battle with the Crows in 1845, which, in one tragic action, reduced the position of the Small Robes from one of power and influence to one of minor importance. Never again did the Small Robes play a significant role in the history of the Northwestern Plains.

Only when we realize that information on the history of other Blackfoot bands before 1850 is practically nonexistent, can we appreciate the significance of this fragmentary sketch of the Small Robes. Had not George Catlin, John Rowand, and Father De Smet failed to recognize the Small Robes' Piegan affiliations, we should know considerably less about the band than we do. In reality, far from being a little-known band, as some writers have suggested, we have greater knowledge of the history of the Small Robes than of any other band of the entire Blackfoot group.[7]

[7] In Larpenteur, 1898, vol. 2, p. 259, footnote, Editor Coues states: "These do not appear to have been a well-known band." Chittenden and Richardson, 1905, vol. 2, p. 524, editors' footnote . . . "they seem to have been little known, and were probably not a large band."

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